

Christmas Eve Among Chinatown Playgoers

Leola Harvey-Elder.

I viewed the show from a seat in Nigger Heaven, or, in other words, the Peanut Gallery. Either name would convey your meaning to any youngster brought up in the city. As there seemed to be no ushers, after the man at the door had taken my ticket, I started in the direction of what would lead in any of the America theaters to the orchestra chairs, but found my way blocked by the man at the door, who had left his post to tell me in sign language that I could not go that way, and pointed a determined-looking finger to a narrow stairway which led upward.

When I had purchased my ticket at the funny little hole of a box office, not being able to speak the language, and receiving no enlightenment from the bunch of hieroglyphics on a red lithograph background, which was pasted over the window, I had simply put down my money, taken the ticket and the change handed me, and walked on, taking it for granted that the Chinese ticket seller had learned enough of American ways to sell me the most expensive seat in the house. So, when I found my way blocked and was directed to a queer little stairway leading I knew not where, I was inclined to stop and argue the matter.

However, I found this was useless, so I gathered my skirts and made a make-believe bold, brave dash up the stairs. After two turns, I arrived, but not at the orthodox Nigger Heaven gallery which I had expected. Instead I found a sort of Adamless Eden—that is, a small gallery in which only women, girls, and small children were allowed.

All the occupants stopped their chatter to turn and stare at me and then started to chatter again louder than ever, but whether about me or the performance I was unable to tell. I sat down where I could see the stage and waited for one of the actors to look up and either quiet the women with a look or give them a calling down. I had once attended a performance when Nat Goodwin had refused to go on with his show until several noisy boys were ejected from the theater and on another occasion had seen Louis James step from a Shakespearean character to quietly call down a box full of giggling, chatting matinee girls. I hated to be one of a gallery full of women to be publicly called down, but I consoled myself by thinking what a novelty it would be to see how a Chinese actor would do it. But the actor who occupied the center of the stage at that moment seemed to pay no attention to us but calmly waved his fan and I was startled most out of my wits by the din which followed.

A Chinese actor certainly has a novel way of calling down a group of noisy women. He simply makes a sign to the orchestra and the musicians drown the women out with a noise ten times as loud and noisy as anything you could imagine. It did not seem to bother him one bit that the noise he had called forth to drown out the women was at the same time ruining his intensely dramatic scene, for he continued to strut and fan and act for all he was worth and no one could hear a word he was saying.

While the actor was strutting to the Inferno music, I looked over the gallery railing to get a view of the rest of the house and found that while the upper part of the theater was very un-American in putting the high-priced-seats purchasers in the gallery, the lower half was very much English for I found myself looking into a regular pit. The pit was filled with a hundred or more Chinamen, most of whom were smoking while some few were watching the performance with interested faces, just as though they could understand what that actor was ranting about with all of that music playing. After the actor had decided that we had been punished enough he again waved his fan and the musicians stopped suddenly with the same kind of a startling crash as they had started with, only worse.

When the orchestra had quieted down I picked up enough courage to take a good look at the stage and regretted very deeply that I could not have borrowed the play-writing mantle of Geo. Ade for the occasion; I can think of nothing more comical than an American

comedy written and played a la Chinese would be. Just imagine attending a performance where there was no scenery and just a few of the absolutely essential props. Where the orchestra sat on the stage with the actors and the property man and the stage hands walked out on the stage and stood or walked up and down as they pleased. Where all the female parts were played by men and where the orchestra blared forth with brass band crashes right in the middle of the dramatic scenes and completely drowned out the actors.

All of these things happened in the Chinese drama. After the man who had called us down had strutted around for a few moments the orchestra struck up what was supposed to be a pretty entrance tune and in tripped two lovely maidens. Now these female impersonators can give cards and spades to some of the best of the American impersonators and then win out with their wonderfully clever, true-to-life feminine gestures and voice tones. After the girls had talked for about an hour and apparently said nothing except to pass the time of day, they took their leave by making pretty bows and handing their fans with a little hand gesture for all the world like that stick-out-the-little-finger teadrinking poise of the Five o'Clock devotees.

Following a short scene between the leading man and his mother, one of the maidens again entered but as this time she was supposed to meet the hero on the banks of a river, the property man had to make his appearance to render some assistance.

When is a chair not a chair?

When it is a river bank.

The same two chairs which in their natural positions had served the two girls in the former scene in the house were carried down and placed on the stage on their sides and over them was placed a couple of small mats. After waiting until the made-to-order bank was ready, the girl came over and sat down and went on with what seemed to be a love scene. Imagine an American stage hero making love under such conditions.

After arriving in the gallery and getting a view of the position of the stage, I knew that the entrance which had faced me to my right after I had entered the outer door led to the stage, and acting on a sudden impulse and a desire to see if the back of the Chinese stage was as much of a novelty as the front, I went quietly down the stairs, determined to sneak by the doorkeeper and explore the passage to the right.

I found when I reached the foot of the stairs that the doorkeeper was dozing on a bench just outside the door, so I stole softly by him and went down the passage to the right. It was rather dark, and I was beginning to believe that I must have been mistaken about the passage leading to the stage door, when I tripped against the lower of a short flight of stairs. I ascended these, and taking a sudden turn to the left I walked directly on to the back of the stage, and there were all of the hangers-on of Chinatown.

They evidently have no rules barring the actors' numerous friends and innumerable cousins from entering the stage door, possibly thinking a stage-door rule unnecessary where there are no girls in the show, these rules being usually made for the Johnnies.

For the same reason, the non-use of girls, no dressing rooms are provided, and the actors make up and dress for the most part in different little corners of the back half of the stage, in full view of their admiring friends and relatives. The costumes and wigs were, however, hung up in a very methodical fashion. On one rack I saw the different head dresses used for royalty, soldiers, gods and kings, and on another hung a row of beards of different colors, one of which was a bright cerise.

A young boy who could speak English explained the clown-like makeup of two of the actors standing nearby by saying that they were the bad men, but whether he meant they were supposed to be playing the villain parts or the part of the devil I could not ascertain.

My informant showed a sense of



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humor when he turned and pointed to a pretty Chinese maiden, standing just to our right, and asked if I did not think she was a "heap pretty wahine." When I gravely responded that I thought she was very pretty, the look on that Chinese actor's face was a study. Embarrassment and anger struggled for the mastery. He was embarrassed that I should really take him for a woman and angry at his countryman for placing him in such a position. My presence did not prevent his anger from at last winning out, and in a very decided way he snapped out: "He one liar—I all same him."

THE VOLCANO.

Not in many years has the crater at Kilauea been as active as at present. The fires there kindle a desire for knowledge of a scientific nature, and, as far as known, the book recently published by the Hawaiian Gazette Co., Ltd., entitled "Hawaii and Her Volcanoes," by Charles Hitchcock, LL.D., is the only one in existence that fully describes the phenomena. This book is on sale at the different book shops here, and is one that should be in every library. It is fully illustrated by engravings from photographs and sketches and is sold for \$2.00.

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